The Tefia parachute disaster

In April 1972, the Spanish Army, Navy and Air Force mobilized 5,000 men in an exercise to take over the airfield in Tefia. As part of the exercise, called Maxorata-72, five DC3 planes with ninety paratroopers on board left the Gando air base in Gran Canaria heading for Tefia.

There were very strong winds over the plain that morning. An officer asked the commander of the brigade if the soldiers could be thrown with the wind and was told that the men were prepared to die. The jump continued.

After several paratroopers had jumped, a strong gust of wind began to hit the area. A local shepherd caught the first soldier who fell and using his knife to cut the parachute strings and save his life. There was more and more wind as men kept falling and being dragged, still attached to their parachutes, across the ground. Some were dragged over three kilometres before hitting stone walls and others, already dead, were left hanging on the branches of fig trees. Two sergeants and eleven soldiers lost their lives and 56 were seriously injured.

The Nuestra Señora de la Peña clinic in Rosario was notified of the accident and the three doctors there, the only ones on the island, worked for more than six hours with the victims, who arrived in private cars, taxis, small trucks and military vehicles from Tefía. The help of neighbours to transport the victims was crucial on an island where there were still no ambulances. The casualties arrived in very bad condition, but medical facilities were limited and the wounded could not be fully treated, as there was no blood or plasma available. Instead they were evacuated to Las Palmas.

The military censorship of the time acted swiftly to ensure that the circumstances of the incident were kept secret and there are no images or exact data on the circumstances of the tragedy. The facts that are known came from locals who saw the disaster and from a photographer who covered the manoeuvres. His audio-visual and photographic material was confiscated and kept secret by the military. The families of the victims in Gran Canaria were slow to learn the news.

Eventually, the tragedy was recognised and a monument with the name of the thirteen deceased was raised on the Tefia plain, near the astronomical observatory. In 2003, a sculpture was added with an inscription that ends "triumph or death".